

A visit to virtual pasts: the new museum in Ercolano

Shelley Hales

Earlier this year, a new museum opened in Ercolano, a few metres away from ancient Herculaneum. It is called the Museo Archeologico Virtuale and aims to convey aspects of the Vesuvian cities' life and death through a series of virtual reality installations. Shelley Hales reviews her and her Bristol undergraduates' first impressions of the experience.

A tourist-trap with a history

Some of you may know that the ancient cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum are currently in an official state of emergency, a state that seems a little melodramatic when applied to cities that were wiped out by the cataclysmic eruption of Vesuvius in A.D. 79. The emergency, however, though less spectacular, is just as threatening to the cities' long term survival, as the Italian authorities try to face up to the huge financial demands of keeping alive sites that, if nature had had its way, would never have been returned to day. A pessimist might say that this sudden spring into action is all rather too late – a bit like Pliny the Elder strapping a pillow to his head as a way of escaping the fall-out from Vesuvius (even if you haven't read Pliny the Younger's account of his uncle's meeting with the volcano you won't be surprised that several paragraphs later he is lying dead on the beach).

Already by the mid nineteenth century, plenty of people were bemoaning the state of the ruins. From the 1860s onwards, Pompeii was a fully-fledged tourist site, with an admission fee and turnstiles, and a new rail link meant that increasing numbers of visitors were coming down to Naples from northern Europe. Those tourists brought back photographs, souvenirs, and knowledge, generating further interest in the site. They also brought imagination, coming home to pour out their fantasies of the site in print or on canvas: tourists like Edward Bulwer-Lytton, who wrote the blockbuster novel *The Last Days of Pompeii* or Théophile Gautier, a French novelist who wrote about Pompeii coming back to life and Lawrence Alma-Tadema who, having honeymooned in Pompeii, spent the next decade or so painting scenes of Pompeian life back in his London studio. These men created an exciting vision of Pompeii that

inspired yet more tourists to visit and shaped their expectations of the site.

150 years later and the 'city of the dead' is Italy's biggest draw, attracting tens of thousands of visitors a day (often hosting, as critics have pointed out, more people than actually ever lived there before the eruption). Tourists are crucial to the site's survival – they bring in millions of euros and sustain international interest in the site. But they also put huge stress on the remains even before they have left rubbish, lifted a souvenir, or gouged their name into the paintings. Part of the emergency measures are to try both to manage and improve the tourist experience, to educate visitors more effectively, and to disperse visitors wider across the Vesuvius area so that they are not all concentrated at Pompeii.

Ancient ruins and modern solutions: bringing Pompeii back to life

The Museo Archeologico Virtuale is one of those initiatives, using the latest virtual reality techniques to draw tourists to modern Ercolano. You might wonder why go into a virtual museum when a real, ancient site (and one that is significantly more 'intact' than Pompeii), Herculaneum, is a couple of hundred metres down the road. What can the 'virtual' tour add?

One of the first exhibits makes visitors walk through a curtain of smoke, the idea being that they have walked into the eruption to their fiery deaths. On the other side stands a ruined house and a projection on the floor of a rubble-strewn surface. But as visitors walk on this surface, bits of mosaic appear. As they wave their arms over it, the rubble recedes and the mosaic is exposed. It is as though the visitors to the museum are the excavators, finding the floor for the first time. It is possible to do the same on walls, wiping away ash to

reveal gleaming frescoes.

But as visitors move nearer the ruined house, it is less clear that they are the excavators of post-eruption ruin. The house starts miraculously reconstituting itself; by the time tourists stand in front of the screen on which it is projected, the house is entirely reconstructed, as it might have looked before the eruption. It is as if the visitors' 'digging' has taken them back in time to ancient Pompeii itself.

The effect is a bit unsettling; walking along a dark corridor visitors suddenly feel something pass by, a waft of light. These are 'ghosts' flitting by – dim projections of Pompeians seemingly unaware of the modern tourists: women walking, labourers pulling carts, soldiers patrolling.

Baths and brothels: Victorian prurience at Pompeii

Moving on, visitors find themselves in a bath, paddling in a virtual pool, which splashes when they move their feet, and looking at a steamy 'window'. Waving the hands in front of it, it is possible to see through 'the glass' to a nude female bather, with her back rather coyly turned, attended by her African slave. The scene doesn't look very authentically Pompeian. Couldn't they have made it more convincing? But when the viewer looks harder it becomes clear – this isn't 'real' Pompeii, but a nineteenth-century painting imagining Pompeii and the sultry women who lived there. If anyone was in doubt that nudity, and not bathing practices, was the theme, they were about to be put right.

Victorians loved the seamy side of Pompeii, which they furtively imagined as a pagan city of excess, purged of its sins by divine wrath. The way in which the numerous 'pornographic' finds of Pompeii should be concealed from or presented to visitors (and to A-level students) has long been debated – many of them are still in the so-called Secret Cabinet in Naples Museum (rather to titillate and attract than to deter and protect perhaps). Leaving the bath scene, the visitor passes images of some of the most extravagantly pornographic images from the Suburban Baths in Pompeii, which are

still not on general view back on site.

Eventually a dead end is reached in front of a screen on which is projected a reconstructed dark alley leading to the brothel of Pompeii. The visitor reaches the building, gets to the door; it begins to open to reveal... a naked woman reclining on a couch and waving a strategic ostrich feather! But who is the woman – an Italian version of the Page Three girl? One of the women from the Pompeian frescoes? No, she is none other than the woman imagined in his painting *In the Tepidarium* by Lawrence Alma-Tadema himself. Another Victorian fantasy, which looks decidedly frumpy compared with the Pompeian frescoes.

Reflecting on the experience

This was the extraordinary museum that my Bristol undergraduates and I visited during the Easter holidays. Back outside, as we strolled away from ‘fake’ Pompeii to ‘real’ Herculaneum, we chatted about the rather odd experience we had just had. MAV appeared to give us what tourists want – it let us pretend to be the first excavators, it let the ghosts of the past come alive around us and it indulged all our fantasies about pagan life. But were they our fantasies? Virtual Reality might have felt a terribly modern way of reaching back to the ancient past but the past we had momentarily inhabited was not ancient Pompeii but nineteenth-century tourist Pompeii. We relived Gauthier, Lytton and Alma-Tadema’s fantasies of seeing the city (always Pompeii, hardly ever Herculaneum) come back to life, and meeting some pagan ladies who might show a bit more ankle (and a lot less corset) than the women back home. Virtual Reality took us back not to A.D. 79 but to 1879. And, in fact, if we had have rolled up to the Bay of Naples around that time, we would have been able to visit a nineteenth-century version of Virtual Reality. The ‘Pompeiorama’ just outside Pompeii allowed visitors to peer through spy-holes onto model reconstructions of Pompeii before and during the eruption.

As we walked into Herculaneum, we began to question with whose eyes we were looking at the ruined city. The lesson of MAV is a good one. Every visitor to Pompeii and Herculaneum lives with the legacy of past generations of visitors to the sites, not only with the effects of the damage they wrought and the traditions of tourism they sparked but with the imaginative visions they left behind which shape the way we ourselves imagine what the last days of Pompeii might have been like.

Shelley Hales, in the middle of the back row, teaches at the University of Bristol. Her book Roman Houses and Social Identity was published by Cambridge University Press in 2003. The favourite part of her job is leading the annual field trip to Italy. Find out more about MAV at: <http://www.museomav.it/>